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INDIVIDUALIZED READING--CONCLUSIONS BASED ON RESEARCH REPORTS.

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CONCLUSIONS ABOUT INDIVIDUALIZED READING BASED ON INFORMAL AND CONTROLLED STUDIES ARE PRESENTED. RESEARCH INDICATES THAT THERE ARE NO HOMOGENEOUS CLASSES, ALTHOUGH VARIOUS GROUPING PLANS HAVE ATTEMPTED TO NARROW THE RANGE OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES. INFORMAL STUDIES BY SOME TEACHERS WHO HAVE TRIED INDIVIDUALIZED READING IN THEIR CLASSROOMS REFLECT ENTHUSIASM FOR THE METHOD. THREE CONTROLLED STUDIES SHOW THAT THERE IS NO JUSTIFICATION FOR URGING ALL FIRST-GRADE TEACHERS TO ADOPT THE METHOD. RELATED STUDIES NOT INVOLVING FIRST-GRADE CHILDREN INVESTIGATED THE EFFECT OF AN INDIVIDUALIZED PROGRAM ON THE CULTURALLY DEPRIVED AND THE HIGHLY ANXIOUS CHILD. IN SOME CASES, TEACHER KNOWLEDGE DOES NOT JUSTIFY AN INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH. RECOMMENDATIONS ARE AS FOLLOWS--(1) CHILDREN PROFIT IF INFORMAL INSTRUCTION SUCH AS STORIES WHICH THE CHILDREN HAVE DICTATED ARE USED. (2) FORMAL READING INSTRUCTION SHOULD INCLUDE A VARIETY OF APPROACHES. (3) THERE SHOULD BE AN EXTENSIVE CLASSROOM LIBRARY. (4) THE TEACHER SHOULD OFTEN REFER TO LISTS OF BASIC SKILLS NEEDED BY CHILDREN. (5) EVALUATION SHOULD BE CONTINUOUS. (6) A TEACHER WHO FEELS INCOMPETENT USING THIS APPROACH SHOULD FOLLOW OTHER PRACTICES. A 63-ITEM BIBLIOGRAPHY IS INCLUDED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (BK)

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INDIVIDUALIZED READING: CONCLUSIONS BASED ON RESEARCH REPORTS

You can go into any modern grocery store and obtain homogenized milk, homogenized peanut butter, and other homogenized products. But despite a hundred years' of administrative manipulation involving various schemes of grading and sectioning you will never find homogenized kids in homogenized classes in modern schools.

Research has shown conclusively that there is no such thing as a truly homogeneous class (4, 5, 11, 32), but many schools still attempt, with little success, to narrow the range of individual differences appreciably by administrative devices such as homogeneous sectioning, Joplin-style interclass deployment, or readiness testing for first grade admission. In New Zealand

most schools follow a much more intelligent procedure--they admit each child to the primary school on his fifth birth anniversary (7), thereby emphasizing his individuality.

In the United States first grade children are approximately six years old chronologically, but in mental age they are four, five, six, seven, and eight (13). To complicate teaching further each child is an entirely different creation having his own unique pattern of learning capabilities and prior educative experiences on which to base further learning. Therefore it has become evident that individualized instruction within the classroom is absolutely essential. Schools provide differentiated work through such procedures as intraclass (within-class) "power" grouping, flexible skills grouping, independent reading and seatwork, individually prescribed instruction, and individualized reading. The last technique, our topic of concern here, has been described in detail elsewhere (33).

Informal Experimentation

Individualized instruction has been recommended by school authorities since shortly after graded schools became common in the middle of the nineteenth century, but individualized reading as a specific approach to teaching beginners is a comparatively recent innovation. It was tried out successfully in an orphanage some thirty years ago (38), and a public school teacher described "Beginning Reading Without Readers" less than twenty years ago (30).

During the last ten or fifteen years there have been several reports of its use in first grade classrooms where teachers were satisfied with results obtained (14, 31, 37, 62). Although not every teacher who has tried it has continued with

individualized beginning reading, some have been very enthusiastic (44, 60), and one went so far as to conclude that individualized reading is most effective at the first grade level and easier to use than a grouping procedure for large classes (42).

Some first grade teachers have tried special adaptations of individualized reading. At least one had children share personal reading in pairs (43), and others initiated a practice which has now become very common--combining small group reading with individualized work (47). A kindergarten teacher made another type of adaptation of individualized reading by holding a series of individual conferences to promote readiness through discussions on picture interpretation, story sequence, and titles of books children had selected from the room library corner (29).

Teachers' published accounts of personal success with individualized reading, however, offer no definite answers to these questions:

(a) Would the same teachers be equally successful when employing different approaches to beginning reading instruction?

(b) Would other teachers of beginning reading succeed as well as these teachers if using the individualized approach?

Only through controlled experiments is it possible to provide adequate objective information.

Controlled Studies

Formal studies of individualized reading as it is practiced at the several elementary and secondary levels have varied greatly in the quality of their design. Looking at the summaries that list such studies, one finds that when the compiler of information has not been particularly concerned with design quality, his research summary tends to show more favorable than unfavorable evidence on individualized

reading (26, 59, 61). But recommendations based on summaries where design and evidence are carefully weighed have been more cautious (36, 40, 50).

Three extensive formal studies have recently provided data on individualized reading for beginners. Spencer devised a special system of individualized reading which included ten days of preliminary instruction on letter names, phonemes, and sight vocabulary; continued intensive instruction in phonetic analysis using Speech-to-Print Phonics (19); and other meaningful situations "for teaching initial consonants and blends, phonograms, final consonants and blends, vowels and homophones."(55) Vocabulary needed for individual reading was taught through experience stories, picture dictionaries, word books, worksheets, and phonics activities. Each experimental room was given three hundred dollars for new classroom library books plus several copies of varied basic textbooks and books borrowed from other rooms. Instruction was offered in individual conferences, pupil-team activities, and group sessions.

The control program utilized a well known basal textbook series and followed the instructional techniques explained in the manual. Children were taught in groups and pupil-team practice was encouraged.(55)

Twenty-two teachers of above average ability were selected by their administrators for the project. Each decided whether she wanted to teach the experimental or the control program and they were paired in the same communities. Those in the experimental program were given three weeks of professional meetings in preparation for the new work, while control teachers had two days of in-service meetings to improve their teaching of the basal program (55).

The outcomes of this study were inevitable. The additional new books, the special phonics lessons, the volunteering of teachers interested in experimentation, the extensive in-service preparation, and the novelty effect of experimentation were all aligned in support of this unusual individualized program. Therefore it certainly was no surprise that the experimental classes scored significantly higher than control classes on most of the standard tests that were administered. The study shows that a greatly enriched, partly individualized program taught by well prepared, better than average, volunteer teachers can be very successful. Unfortunately it does not answer our question about the comparative success of the same teachers with other programs that are equally favored with special material and opportunities. And it does not tell us whether other teachers can succeed with ordinary individualized reading for beginners.

The second study, reported by MacDonald, Harris, and Mann, was designed to determine whether the individual conference feature of individualized reading made a significant contribution to first grade achievement when compared with

[illegible] ...alized reading [illegible] ...st grade... ...when compared with

group instruction (41). Ten experimental and ten control classes were randomly selected from a rural and small town supervisory area. All of the teachers participated in a two-day orientation workshop. Then experimental and control classes utilized the same textbooks, the same workbooks, and the same amount of instructional time. The experimental classes were taught in individual conferences twice a week, while children in control classes were grouped for instruction twice a day. Both types of classes were free to do extension reading as desired. Although three of the experimental group teachers withdrew after the study began, the final sample population included 163 pupils in individualized reading and 210 in group reading.

Achievement tests administered in May revealed no significant differences except that those control groups which tested high in reading readiness in the fall had made significantly more progress than the corresponding individualized reading groups. A specially devised attitude picture test indicated that children in experimental classes showed greater preference for reading than the children in control classes. Among the authors' conclusions was the suggestion "that achievement variables affected by programs may well be predominantly related to the materials involved rather than the interpersonal instructional procedures."(41) This possibility has already been noted in connection with Spencer's study, where it is evident that superior achievement may have been the result of many extra materials rather than an individualized class organization.

The third study was first reported by a committee headed by Rodney Johnson (35),

and later in an abbreviated form by Johnson alone (34). Fourteen individualized first grade reading classes were paired in the same communities with fourteen classes receiving basal reading instruction in groups; all classes were heteregeneously sectioned. When the study began, there were no significant differences between the two sample populations in age, class size, length of school year, or IQ (on the SRA Primary Mental Abilities Test). At the end of the first year the individualized classes were slightly less than two raw score points ahead of the basal classes on the Metropolitan Achievement Tests of Word Knowledge, Word Discrimination, and Reading Comprehension, but this difference was statistically significant. By the end of the third grade the differences were still smaller, but still significant. Differences on tests in other subjects were greater than those in reading, suggesting the possibility that the efforts to equate pupil and teacher capability might not have succeeded fully. There were no significant differences between oral reading competence of individualized and basal group classes (35).

This study surely proves that teachers can succeed in using the individualized approach, but the slight advantage that the individualized classes showed on some of the tests does not seem to justify our urging all first grade teachers to adopt that approach exclusively.

Related Investigations

Several other studies not involving first grade children exclusively may have some bearing on the value of individualized reading for beginners, too. In one of the earlier experiments five primary teachers tried individualized reading with only their most capable groups; although the children in the experiment did somewhat better than others, the degree of superiority was not significant (9). In another study,

where the same teachers used both procedures in a rotation design, second grade children achieved slightly better while grouped for basal reading, but the difference was significant at .05 for only word recognition among the slower groups (51). Teachers in more than one situation have questioned whether young pupils, especially the slower ones, have the capability to work independently for as much time as is required in a fully individualized program (25, 51).

Children from disadvantaged homes and others who are highly anxious or compulsive seem to need a considerable amount of structure in their school work. One investigation revealed that deprived youngsters had difficulty accepting responsibility without considerable external control (3), and another showed that they made greater progress in a structured basal reading program than in a language experience program that progressed into individualized reading (28). Results of a third study indicated that highly anxious children achieved significantly less academic growth in unstructured, permissive classroom situations than in more formal, structured classrooms (24). Such findings force one to conclude that an individualized approach may be appropriate for some children, but not for others.

An individualized program requires that teachers have an extremely thorough knowledge of all reading skills so that every skill can be taught when the opportunity arises during individual conferences. However, two investigations revealed that teachers frequently do not utilize such opportunities well (2, 12). Perhaps this is explained by eight additional studies which suggest that few teachers are so well versed in skills that they can teach them without assistance from a professional guide. (1, 10, 18, 20, 23, 46, 52, 54). In addition, teachers have sometimes pointed out the inefficiency of teaching every child separately when it is possible to teach

skills to several who are ready to utilize them at the same time (51).

Recommendations

There are numerous questions about the effectiveness of individualized reading that have not yet been answered by research (18, 58). However, on the basis of information now available several suggestions can be made in respect to the teaching of beginners.

1. The informal reading program can be introduced profitably during the kindergarten year and during the early first grade weeks by the use of stories that children have dictated individually to the teacher. Such experiences help the teacher assess each child's language development. They also give the pupil an opportunity to grow in language skill and to learn some fundamental facts about the reading process while using the vocabulary of his own neighborhood. A system of initial reading instruction that promotes language growth is recommended because studies have shown a high degree of relationship between general language ability and success in reading (39, 45).

2. The more formal stage of reading instruction should include individualized reading along with other approaches which may be more suitable for different children at various times. A combination of basal and individualized work has been suggested by a number of writers (21, 49, 56, 63). Although such a combination did not produce superior test results in one intermediate school situation, it did motivate a significantly greater amount of reading (57). Satisfying results have been obtained by a combination approach in primary classes, too (48).

3. Regardless of the instructional approach in use, the children and teacher should have and utilize an extensive classroom library containing books for pleasure

reading, books for work-type reading, and materials for skills development. Several fine lists of materials and activities are available (8, 15, 16, 22, 27, 53).

4. When using the individualized approach the teacher should refer regularly to one of the helpful lists of skills that have been prepared by Barbe (6) or by others.

5. Evaluation of individual growth should be continuous: a child who is not making as much progress as expected in individualized study should be moved without delay into a different type of program.

6. Any teacher who does not feel competent to handle fully individualized reading should be permitted to follow other practices which provide adequately for differentiated work.

Individualized reading has been proven to be a worthwhile innovation. But the skillful teacher, like the skillful doctor who is introduced to a new surgical technique, will carefully consider when its application is appropriate and will recognize his own limitations in its use.

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